DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 764 CE 065 048

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TITLE Improving Distance Education Universities through Institutional Research: A Consideration of the Roles and Functions of the Institutional Researcher.
INSTITUTION Open Univ., Walton, Bletchley, Bucks (England). Inst. of Educational Technology.
REPORT NO SRC-R-79
PUB DATE Sep 93
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Anniversary Conference of UNED (15th, San Jose, Costa Rica, March 15-19, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Distance Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Institutional Research; *Open Universities; *Research Utilization; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Researcher Role

ABSTRACT

Several theorists have categorized distance education as an industrial process. Most institutional research can be seen as contributing to this process. This is especially true in the following areas: market research, organization and methods studies, quality control research, the research activities that are components of management information systems, and research and development efforts such as studies of the possible application of new technologies and developmental testing of prototype courses. Notwithstanding this model, institutional research is not a purely technical matter and needs to be understood as a social process of knowledge construction. Complications arise because distance teaching universities have other aims beyond profit maximization. When institutional researchers are full academic members of the university, this can and should profoundly affect their roles as researchers. In such cases, institutional research can serve as a vehicle of self-defense and/or self-criticism. In the existing educational system, institutional often must "respond" to the needs of policymakers. Because the needs of policymakers tend to be short-term and affected by pressing circumstances, institutional researchers have a duty to be aware of wider issues, findings of other research, theoretical developments, and trends in institutional statistics so that they can alert policymakers to developing issues. (MN)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

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1 Introduction

Institutional research can be defined as "systematic investigation designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of an institution". Under such a broad definition it is clear that "institutional research" (IR) is actually practised in a whole range of institutions, by staff in many positions, using a variety of methodologies, and addressing a huge array of issues. For the purposes of the present paper I am going to restrict myself to a consideration of IR as practised in Distance Teaching Universities by professional researchers as part of their duties. By drawing upon my personal experience of carrying out IR in such a context, I will attempt to identify where IR has had an impact and relate this to the roles and functions of the institutional researchers themselves.

When one thinks of "research" in the same breath as "university", the tendency is to conjure up images of academics poring over books in libraries or carrying out experiments in laboratories. For them the aims of research are to push back the frontiers of knowledge, to develop theory, to improve their teaching. However, if one considers "research" in an industrial or commercial context the image shifts to one of research for product development, organisation and methods research, market research, etc.

For Distance Teaching Universities there is an interesting duality because they are both universities and industries, and both models of research are present. For the professional institutional researcher both models are present in the same occupational role and it is the anomalies and contradictions that this produces that I want to concentrate on today.

In short the thesis of the paper is as follows:

* Distance Education has been categorised as an industrial process. Most institutional research can be seen as contributing to this process

* Notwithstanding this model, institutional research is not a purely technical matter and needs to be understood as a social process of knowledge construction

* In particular, complexities arise because distance teaching universities have other aims beyond profit maximisation

* Where institutional researchers are full academic members of the university this can and should profoundly affect their roles as researchers

2 Industrialised research for industrialised education

Theorists such as Peters (1983) and Keegan (1990) have portrayed distance education as "industrialised education". In their support they cite factors that exist within production industries and within distance education such as the increased division of labour, mechanisation, large capital investment costs, and the need for a mass market. Others have argued that they are wrong to say that traditional forms of education have been

unaffected by such processes (Sewart 1990) and that they fail to acknowledge the debates about the changing nature of industrialisation (Campion and Renner 1993). For the purposes of the present paper I want merely to take the position that distance education can be viewed as industrialised education and to examine how this can help our interpretation of institutional research.

To begin with I have taken a number of clearly recognised research areas out of their industrial context and given examples from my own institution of corresponding institutional research.

Market Research

* Surveys of prospective students to ask them what subjects they would like the University to provide

* Studies of responses to advertising in various newspapers in order to maximise the effects of publicity campaigns

Organisation and Methods/Work Study

* Studies of the turn-round time for assignment marking and recording

* Reviews of course production methods

Quality Control

* Surveys of students to measure their reactions to the courses

* Analysis of computer and tutor-marked grade distributions

Management Information Systems

* The numbers of students on courses, their performance and their flows through the system

* Planning and modelling

* Studies of cost-effectiveness

Research and development

* Studies of the possibilities of new technologies such as satellites and computer-conferencing

* The developmental testing of prototype courses

Elsewhere I have talked about three models of evaluation: "Market", "Liberal" and "Radical" (Woodley, 1991). From my own observations I believe that the great majority of institutional research as practised in distance education, falls within the "Market" model, and can be

categorised under one or more of the sub-headings above. Implicit within this model is the image of the institutional researcher as a technician or a neutral scientist supplying information for management decision making.

I am not seeking to denigrate this role in IR. In fact I consider a close working relationship with institutional decision-makers to be absolutely vital for institutional researchers. They should be responsive to the needs of decision-makers and accountable to them. However, what I want to move away from is the notion borrowed from the industrial sector that research can produce a quick solution or a "technical fix" for management problems.

How does one judge the success or otherwise of research within the "Market " model? Ideally one should be able to point out how the results led to a change in the system that increased the efficiency or effectiveness of that system.

To take a simple example from my own institution, we were able to show through surveys that very few students were listening to our radio broadcasts and that almost all students had access to a cassette-player. This, together with financial information, let the University to conclude that it was cheaper to distribute audio materials on cassettes.

Unfortunately the great majority of IR does not produce such clear-cut "positive" results. This can be due to a number of reasons. Firstly, IR is just one input into institutional decision-making. Decisions are frequently made which run counter to research findings due to factors such as internal or external political pressures or financial constraints. Secondly, good IR may feed into the general stock of management information rather than into a particular decision or change. Finally one has to acknowledge that it is often due to poor research.

What constitutes "good" institutional research? In my experience there are certain basic standards that must be met:

* Detailed discussions with the client concerning the actual nature of the research question.

* The research question must be seen to address a priority issue

* There must be the possibility of some action as a result of the research

* Collaboration with the clients during the course of the research

* The production of the research results within an appropriate time period and in a style acceptable to the client

At a more fundamental level the quality of research will depend upon which research methods are employed and how well they are implemented. By its very nature distance education, with its separation of the teacher and the learner, presents a whole set of problems for the social researcher. Added to this is the tremendous variation in distance education programmes themselves. Programmes vary in terms of level,

formal versus informal, and available communications channels. In response to this, virtually the whole range of social science research methods have been used at one time or another to meet the informational needs of distance education management. When asked which methods should be used it is very difficult to give a simple answer. I will outline some possible replies:

a) "Appropriate methods"

One answer is to say that you pick the methods that are appropriate to the research problem. For example, if you want to know the drop-out rate on a given course you would clearly go for a "quantitative" study, probably based on course registration or attendance data. If you wanted to find out about the effect of a radio campaign about contraception on village women you might well decide that this should be done "qualitatively" by sensitive women interviewers in the peoples' own homes.

However, even with these examples it is not a straight-forward matter. Administrative records might not accurately reflect drop-out rates. In our second example,one could also imagine a quantitative study based on sales of contraceptives or on the actual birth-rates.

b) "Scientific methods"

Most researchers would agree with this but there are divisions within social science as to how social reality can be measured and hence what can be called "scientific". Adherents of the quantitative, empirical school would always select objective surveys, tests and experiments, while those who felt that such methods did not tap into "what was really going on" would favour fieldwork based on observation, participation and interviews.

c) "Methods demanded by the situation"

There will always be factors in the researchers environment that influence the methods that are chosen. Such pragmatic considerations include external pressures, cost, available research skills and geography.

d) "Multiple methods"

In recent times more and more researchers seem to have come to the conclusion that it is better to select a variety of research methods when approaching a problem, rather than any one single method. This is particularly the case with programme evaluation.

It is now generally acknowledged that it is insufficient to evaluate a programme on the basis of pre and post-tests of the knowledge held by students. This is especially so in the case of part-time and distance education where reality is often "messier", or more complex, in the sense that environmental factors, at home and at work, are likely to play a greater part in the learning process. While we still need to know what has been learned, we also need to find out the reactions of all the people concerned, we need to know about the process of how the programme

actually ran, and we need to know about any positive or negative side-effects.

Multiple methods are needed because different facets of the problem are best addressed in different ways. Their use can also be justified using the concept of "triangulation", a term which is borrowed from land surveying. It means that you are more likely to pin-point a phenomenon if you set about measuring it from several different points rather than just one.

So far we have considered IR as a neutral, rational and technical approach to improved management decision making. We have suggested that it is problematic in terms of the prioritisation of tasks, the elaboration of the research question and the selection of research methodologies, but, with the market model of IR, these can be seen as technical problems to be resolved by rational debate. The institutional researcher is the technician. Once the task is clarified and the appropriate method selected, he or she can proceed.

However, in my case I am not merely a "technician" but a full academic member of the university. This means that I share in the responsibility for shaping and implementing the policy of the university, and that I have certain rights and duties as a member of the academic profession. I realise that not all institutional researchers enjoy such status but in my experience it is through such a status that the impact of IR can be maximised. Therefore, I want to examine the implications of the professional role of the institutional researcher in the remainder of this paper.

As a full member of the university which I am researching, it is most unlikely that I am going to be operating as a "neutral" scientist. Does this matter? In 1961 Gouldner had attacked what he took to be the dominant professional ideology of sociologists: that favouring the value-free doctrine of social science. In 1968 he returned to the fray because he feared " that the myth of a value-free social science is about to be supplanted by still another myth, and that the once glib acceptance of the value-free doctrine is about to be superseded by a new but no less glib rejection of it" (Gouldner, 1968, p 103). He took to task Becker and others in the Chicago School who sided with the "underdogs" in their studies of deviant behaviour. (See for example Becker, 1963). They did so on the grounds that it is impossible for a social scientist to do research uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies. Work must be written either from the stand-point of subordinates or superiors because one cannot do equal justice to both. Gouldner, on the other hand, while recognising the inevitability of bias and partisanship, notes "the fact remains that two researchers may have the same bias but, nonetheless, may not be equally objective" (Gouldner, 1968, p 111). He goes on to outline three possible conceptions of sociological objectivity. "Normative objectification" is the objectivity of the court judge which "requires his explication of the moral value in terms of which his judgement has been rendered"(Gouldner, 1968, p 113). "Personal authenticity" is a form of objectivity that involves "the capacity to acknowledge 'hostile information' - information that is discrepant with our purposes, hopes, wishes or values"(Gouldner, 1968, p 114). A third component of objectivity is "transpersonal replicability"

which means that sociologists have described their procedures with such explicitness that others employing them on the same problem would come to the same conclusion.

Gouldner, then, did not see partisanship as incompatible with objectivity. "The physician, after all, is not necessarily less objective because he has made a partisan commitment to his patient and against the germ." (Gouldner, 1968, p 113). However, Gouldner did not address the question of the researcher's position in relation to the different factions. For example, how would it have affected Becker's research if he had been doing the research for the police force, or even if he was part of that police force? As an institutional researcher for the Open University, and as a full academic member of that university, there are three sets of constraints acting on me: the need to be a professional, objective researcher; the need to act responsibly toward, and to seek improvements in the institution of which I am a member; the need to act in accordance with my own values.

Professionalism and objectivity should permeate all of the institutional researcher's work, but the notion of partisanship will vary according to the task at hand. In the next section I want to consider the case where institutional researchers are called upon to act in a partisan way towards their own institution by defending it against outsiders.

3 Institutional research as self-defence

While Distance Teaching Universities can be viewed as industries for some purposes, there are also crucial differences. Whereas businesses tend to have profit-maximisation as their predominant if not sole aim, universities tend to have several. These include goals related to student numbers, improved teaching methods, research output and benefits to the local community. Many DTU's are also committed to egalitarian aims concerning which sectors of the population they are trying to reach with their courses. Consequently, when the government come to decide upon the success or otherwise of DTU's, they are liable to examine the DTU's performance across all of these aims. It is at such times that IR can be used to defend the university.

In 1990 the Secretary of State for Education and Science established a review of the UK Open University. The government were seeking to expand the total provision of higher education for part-time students and wished to see whether the Open university was the appropriate means for such an expansion. The Review sought the answers to thirteen questions concerning the contribution made by the Open University and possible ways of funding expansion. I was directly involved in answering the four following questions:

"What is the contribution of the Open university in opening up access to Higher Education to students without traditional qualifications, and those from under-represented groups?"

"What is the contribution of the Open university in increasing the supply of graduates in areas of national shortage?"

"How does the performance of Open University graduates compare with those from other universities and polytechnics in the labour market?"

"How does the University compare with other institutions of higher education in relation to part-timers' progression and drop-out rates?"

This is not the place to attempt to detail the exact information that the University was able to assemble over a very short period of time in order to answer these questions. Instead I would like to draw out the general lessons for successful IR in such a situation:

* We did not have to start from scratch. Because our information systems were in place, we were able to assemble very quickly the required data on topics such as progress rates and the number of graduates with varying proportion of credits in Maths Science and Technology in their degree profiles.

From the point of view of "under-represented groups", we were able to present information on gender, age, occupation, educational qualifications, ethnic origin, disability, prisons, the armed forces and geographic location.

* Some of the questions required survey data. In a number of cases we were able to draw upon surveys that we had already carried out for our own purposes. (For example, we were able to say what proportion of our students had transferred into conventional higher education). For the performance of graduates in the labour market we were required to carry out a new survey, but we were able to do this quickly and efficiently, because we had done such surveys in the past and we had the research infrastructure needed for such a task.

* Probably due to our track record of carrying out and publishing detailed IR which was often critical of the University's achievements, we were seen as being capable of evaluating ourselves without the necessity of bringing in some third party to carry out the evaluation. This placed us in a much stronger position because we could directly negotiate the appropriate questions to be asked, the ways in which they should be answered and the interpretation of the actual data.

Opinion within the University suggested that we came out of the Review rather well. Clearly an institution with a big IR input is in a stronger position to respond to examinations by outside funding bodies. However, it is my contention that a lot of this strength is gained when IR is carried out by semi-autonomous academic researchers because a) they demonstrate their independence through external publication and b) they carry out speculative research the relevance of which may not be clear to the institution at the time it is carried out.

4 Institutional research as self-criticism

When institutional researchers are members of the university's academic community, they have certain freedoms as well as duties. These freedoms, if not abused, can lead to creative work that is within the interests of the university. However, whereas work done as self-defence leads to direct praise from one's institution, others types of research can seem irrelevant at best and unpalatable at worst.

One freedom is the ability to follow one's own interests to a certain extent, rather than follow the dictates of short-term management demands. As mentioned in the previous section this can lead to speculative research that nobody has commissioned, but which eventually emerges as vital information. It may produce disturbing results,as when it was revealed that graduation rates at my own university were decreasing and that this was only partly due to the decline in the proportion of teachers among our students. It may lead one into other disciplines, where new ideas, concepts, theories and methods may have relevance to distance education.

I want to talk about one particular freedom (although I would argue that it is also a duty), and that is the freedom of the institutional researcher to help shape an institution's goals, to remind the institution of these goals, to monitor the extent to which these are achieved, and to publish the results of such research. As an example I will draw upon my own experience in the field of equal opportunities and with particular reference to ethnic monitoring.

In 1987 the Open University Senate, of which I am a full voting member, passed a motion calling for the development of policies to "increase the recruitment of and provision of services for students from racially, socially and economically disadvantaged groups"and the routine collection and maintenance of data on "major relevant parameters including ethnic origin (as defined by the student)".

The task of ethnic monitoring was given to the Student Progress Committee and so, as a member of this committee, I was heavily involved in the research design. Despite the injunction from Senate to collect the information, there was continuing debate in the Committee as to when the question should be asked (eg at application or after registration), whether the question should have an option saying "I prefer not to answer this question", and indeed whether the question should be asked at all. There were also fierce arguments about the details of the actual question. On the face of it, the request for ethnic monitoring was straight forward because after many years of debate and controversy the UK had just come up with a tested and agreed question that was to be used on the 1991 Census form. If this question was used it would be relatively uncontroversial and would eventually have comparable national statistics. In the event we actually came up with a very different question. The details of this whole process are recorded elsewhere (Woodley, Taylor and Butcher, 1992). The point I am trying to make that I, as an institutional researcher, was involved in the shaping of the policy and in

its implementation. My contribution was clearly not just that of a technical adviser.

Early results from the ethnic monitoring exercise are encouraging from the point of view of representation. The proportion of black and ethnic minority students appears to match the proportion in the general adult population. However, the progress that they make as students is less encouraging. As an "objective" researcher I have attempted to control for the effects of factors such as previous educational qualifications, course choice and age, but it still seems to be the case that these students are less likely to gain a course credit at the end of their first year. From my own value position, I want to alert the University to the situation and to produce improvements within the system and , as an academic, I expect and am expected to publish interesting findings. However, as an employee of the University I have to consider how, in what form, and to whom this information should be released. The university is anxious not to get bad publicity over what is a very sensitive issue, but demand for the information is great both from outside the university and from within by regional staff and by academics writing a course on "Race and education". Therefore, the process whereby the research data becomes public knowledge is one of negotiation.

5 Conclusions

The theme of this conference is the promotion of distance education through institutional research. It is my impression that a great proportion of the institutional research that has been carried out in this area has had little visible impact. On optimistic days I would argue that this is not important - a programme of institutional research indicates a reflective institution that is committed to self-improvement and the complexities of management decision-making mean that the effects of such research are hard to discern. On more pessimistic days it seems that institutional research is a useful means for managers to delay making any decisions, or a treasure trove of conflicting data that can be used selectively to justify the decision they want to take for other reasons.

When sitting down to write this paper, I started from the other end. I considered all of the institutional research that I had been involved in, thought about those projects where in my opinion there had been most impact, and then attempted to delineate the critical features of the "success stories". In doing so I came back to the short presentation that I made to our new Vice-Chancellor when I was asked to summarise my work in ten minutes. I based my talk on three words: "Respond", "Alert" and "Provoke". To me these summarise the three key roles of the effective, professional and committed institutional researcher, and in each case my power to perform these roles is increased by my academic status.

In IR you have to "respond" to the needs of policy-makers. To achieve impact you need to be "where the action is" and you need to be accountable. However, this does not mean that you have to agree. Your independence as a researcher can give you the freedom to dispute whether

the policy-makers are asking the right questions or interpreting the data correctly.

The needs of policy-makers tend to be short-term and affected by pressing circumstances. It should be the duty of the institutional researcher to be aware of wider issues, research findings elsewhere, theoretical developments, trends in institutional statistics etc, and to "alert" policy-makers to their implications.

It is also the duty of a good institutional researcher to be a trouble-maker. He or she must be able to point out the things that are going wrong and to "provoke" action within the institution to put things right.

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